

Editor's pick

One hundred years ago, the life expectancy for a male adult was 47 years; today, it is 73 years. During this same 100-year period, we have eliminated or curtailed the devastating effects of pestilent diseases and have decreased the incidence of nutritional diseases, at least in the United States. While such progress is exciting for humankind, it has left the medical profession with the task of controlling chronic and degenerative illnesses—the inevitable consequence of living longer. Examples of such chronic diseases include cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and renal failure.

Physicians and scientists were optimistic about conquering these disorders. The World Health Organization even redefined health as, “a state of complete physical, mental and social well being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”¹ The American public was ready and eager to fight this new battle, pouring billions of dollars into the National Institutes of Health and private research charities.

To date, we have not made major progress in curing chronic illness; our only interventions are prevention and palliation. *wjm* has devoted this issue to highlighting the physical illness of individuals with chronic mental illness and the mental health of people with chronic physical

illness. Clearly, they are simply two sides of the same coin. Social ostracism; lack of access to care; the inability to complete such activities of daily living as grocery shopping, bathing, and getting dressed can be insurmountable obstacles in either case.

This issue of *wjm* provides some insightful advice and reflection as well as practical tools for the primary care practitioner. An anonymous writer (p 346) looks at alcoholism, the effect that this disease has had on her life and how it may affect her career as a physician. Rosenblatt and Block (p 320) provide practical guidance on end-of-life issues, when requests for cessation of treatment may be clouded by depression and faulty decision-making. Osborn (p 329) discusses the physical health of people with chronic mental illnesses and suggests ways to improve their overall health.

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Reference

- 1 Fitzgerald FT. The tyranny of health. *N Engl J Med* 1994;331:196-198.